

CAUTIOUS BIDDER [48]

Last Saturday saw the trial to aid selection for the team to represent Wales in this year's Lady Milne (the Ladies Home International). This means incidentally that it is twelve months since I resumed writing these articles. Forty-seven pieces in that time shows impressive stamina, if nothing else, but I may slow down a bit this year.

Sadly, only four pairs entered the Lady Milne trial this time around, with three to be selected. The following board figured in the final match, when Sue and Gilly sat North/South against Jennifer Wardell and Eleanor Price. It gave rise to an interesting defensive problem.

Board 7; Dealer South; both vulnerable

	♠42	
	♥AJ8	
	♦J107	
	♣A8632	
♠QJ87		♠K1093
♥Q54		♥972
♦Q9853		♦AK2
♣7		♣KQ4
	♠A65	
	♥K1063	
	♦64	
	♣J1095	

First the bidding.

<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>
			P
P	P	1S	P
4S	P	P	

Jennifer and Eleanor play a weak no trump and four card majors – hence Jennifer's 1S opening. They also employ the losing trick count, and it was this, apparently, that prompted Eleanor, sitting West, to bid the spade game.

I have a considerable prejudice against the losing trick count, which I see misapplied and generally messed up on a more or less routine basis. It may not be quite as bad as relying solely upon 'points' to evaluate hands, but it's close. The West hand here has only seven 'losers', but of course it would be quite mad to view it as having the same playing strength as if the three Queens were three Aces. So the losing trick count requires some adjustment to take account of the fact that you're staring at Queens, not Aces (or even Kings). By the time you have made the initial calculation and followed that with the necessary adjustment you might just as well have exercised your bridge judgement in the first place.

But the urge to turn hand evaluation into an exercise in primary school arithmetic remains strong – and my resistance is viewed in some quarters as eccentric, if not downright dangerous. But I'll stick to my guns and continue to argue that it makes no more sense to convert a bridge hand into a number than it would be to do the same for a Turner painting

or a Mozart symphony.

It is not the case (of course) that I have anything against counting at bridge. Counting is at the heart of the game. But I still prefer to regard a bridge hand as a picture, not a number. I don't know if Eleanor agrees with me – she may have mentioned the losing trick count as tongue in cheek justification for what she knew was an aggressive action.

Anyway, 4S made.

What happened was this. Sue (South) led the Jack of clubs, which Gilly took with her Ace. Gilly realised that declarer had two club winners waiting to be cashed. She therefore judged, correctly, that a heart switch was called for. She might simply have played Ace and another heart, but even if partner had the King that would have yielded only two tricks. Gilly couldn't know that Sue had the trump Ace. As far as she could tell, the defence needed three heart tricks to defeat the spade game. So her play of a low heart was well reasoned.

A low heart....how low? Well, the 8, her lowest card in the suit. Declarer contributed the 2 from hand, and Sue took her King. What now? If Sue had given the matter sufficient thought (more than her customary few seconds) she might have reflected that she had seen all the small heart cards, so Gilly's 8 need not deny an honour. But the ingrained assumption that the 8 was a high card, and therefore denying possession of an honour, proved too strong. Sue concluded that she needed to look elsewhere for the setting trick...so she switched to a diamond. And eight tricks for declarer had suddenly become ten.

Had this happened when Sue was partnering me, my reaction might well have given rise to further poor boards. But in this respect at least Gilly is a better partner for Sue than I am. Still, I am disappointed in her lack of ingenuity. Had the Hideous Hog held the North hand he would surely have offered East (the Rueful Rabbit) the 8 of hearts in exchange for East's 2 – a swap offered with the best of motives in a sincere effort to improve East's hand. Had this ploy succeeded (try it next time; I'm sure the director will be sympathetic) and had Gilly then led the 2, Sue would have returned a heart in a flash.

Declarer also made ten tricks in spades at the other table, but that was in a part-score. So well bid Eleanor!

GD